



## THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES OF COMMON PROBLEMS WHILE GAINING ENGLISH SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS AND THEIR PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE SKILLS AUTONOMOUSLY

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### Abstract

The importance of learning multiple languages is accepted universally. Improving language skills of the entire population is a priority for Turkey to increase the international competitiveness and also for the perspective integration to EU. Despite the fact that a long history and extensive efforts devoted to foreign language teaching in Turkey, the success has been noted to be limited. In this study, the potential problems and challenges during foreign language education in the higher education institutions were evaluated based on interviews with undergraduate students who were learning English. The study was conducted with a total of 32 students enrolled to various departments at Kafkas University. The results revealed that the students identified a number of challenges that they face while gaining the language skills along with personal strategies to overcome such challenges. Heavy grammar based teaching strategy and evaluation along with low level of native exposure and inadequate student participation were the main problems suggested by students.

**Keywords:** language problems, speaking skill, listening skill, foreign language learning, speaking and listening barriers

### 1. Introduction

Language education programs are extensively evaluated worldwide for increased performance. Although teaching foreign languages in formal school environments in Turkey dates back to period of Ottoman Empire, the importance of learning foreign languages was more emphasized in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The early languages

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of Arabic and Persian have changed over time to the three common European languages, English, German, and French. In 1908, French was declared as the obligatory foreign language and was initiated to be taught at every school. After the proclamation of republic in Turkey, English was incorporated to public education as a foreign language and in 1950's, universities were established with English as the instruction language. In 1981, two semesters of English became a compulsory for all higher education. Until 1998-99 academic year, English was a compulsory component of only as early as in secondary school curriculum. Starting 1998, teaching English was initiated at 4th and 5th grades. Since 2012, English as foreign language is a part of curriculum in 2nd grade and since then, students could choose a second foreign language in secondary school. Despite the long efforts, Turkey still ranks among lowest in the proportion of population with a foreign language skills in Europe (Eurobarometer, 2006). Therefore, improving foreign language teaching strategies are a priority (Şakiroğlu & Kaya, 2017). Nevertheless, heavy grammar oriented teaching has led a lower success in the receiving and productive stage skills of listening and speaking skills throughout Turkey. Evaluation of language programs and pinpointing shortcomings of the curriculum is essential for improving the contemporary language education program and proper utilization of language teaching resources particularly for listening and speaking skills.

In this study, we interviewed a number of higher education students who were pursuing to intensive English program to evaluate the common challenges faced by higher education students while acquiring listening and speaking skills and the strategies students developed to overcome those problems.

## **2. Limitations of Study**

This study is limited with the students studied intensive English program in 2014. The other limitations are the gender of the students and the type of school they graduated from. The last limitation is the barriers students come across while learning foreign language and their personal opinion about how to approach these problems.

## **3. Material and Methods**

Qualitative research method was employed for this paper. The study was conducted with students enrolled to various departments at Kafkas University and were pursuing intensive English program at the time of the interview. A total of 32 students from English Language and Literature Department and French-Turkish-English Translation Department participated to the interview. A total of four interview questions were prepared with the help of four English language experts and one Turkish language expert. The questions were;

- What difficulties/ challenges do you face while gaining listening skills?

- What difficulties/ challenges do you face while gaining conversation competences?
- What extra-curricular activities do you do individually to improve listening skills?
- What extra-curricular activities do you do individually to improve speaking skills?

Randomly selected 32 students were interviewed with the questions. The interview questions were recorded in a written format and analyzed as qualitative assessment. Frequency of the responses was compared with the prevalence of the problems and practices in literature.

### 3.1 The analysis of data on language skills

After a literature review for the strategies to teach language skills properly, we compiled several codes for the problems students come across while learning English and the suggestions for solution. 32 Students from different departments were interviewed and frequencies of the problems and solutions students stated during interviews were detected. Speaking and listening skills were evaluated/assessed with the help of content analysis technique of quantitative research.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1 The Problems and Challenges in Listening Comprehension Skills

After an extensive literature review, we gathered a number of key barriers while improving listening skills. We also conducted a frequency analysis for the presence of the key challenges among the student responses. The written responses of students to identify major challenges in acquiring listening skills revealed a wide range of problems, challenges, and barriers. Among the 32 students interviewed, 21 indicated that they have problems in gaining listening skills.

Inability to understand the verbal message due to the length of the materials used or the complexity of the cues has been listed in the top of the challenges (Carroll, 1977; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Chen, 2005). The interviewees expressed the very same problem with a high frequency. A total of 14 students (S1,S6,S8,S10,S12,S16,S18,S19,S20,S21,S24,S28,S29) remarked the length of the materials used or the complexity of the cues. For example, S1 stated that *"I cannot understand the words until a few repetitions. I want the speakers speak more slowly and understandably"*. In literature, anxiety (Vandergrift, 1999) and ability to understand of unfamiliar words (Yıldırım & Yıldırım, 2016) are counted as part of the listening comprehension problem. However, only a few students (4S=S1, S6, S22, S28) mentioned the problem. Student 6 expressed *"It may be anxious to listen to the parts we listened, so easy parts should be chosen. It is not a skill that can be developed in just a course."* S8 pointed *"I am having a hard time understanding it while I am listening since the conversation seems very quick. I do not fully understand the words. It is one of the most challenging courses."* S12 expressed *"I sometimes*

*have to listen a few times when I listen to short phrases in conversation."* S20 mentioned the very point via the expression that *"The parts we listened to in the listening lessons are a bit tricky. The speaker is very fluent and the pronunciations are very different."* S21 discussed *"The biggest problem we are encountering in listening is the pronunciation we are not used to in spoken language. Especially the use of words and phrases we have encountered in English songs"*

Competence to deduce the meaning of unknown words and limited vocabulary (Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Underwood, 1989) were stated by S3 and S12. For example, S12 stated *"I sometimes have to listen a few times when I cannot understand what they say or when the speaker uses the abbreviated terms."* Similarly, S3 indicated *"I am bored because I do not understand, and I am discouraged because I cannot follow after a while."*

Although emphasized frequently in the language learning research (Dozer, 1997; Hasan, 2000; Vandergrift, 2007) only a few students expressed facilitating visual support (S22,S26,S32). Another problem encountered in listening is that students either totally miss the message or misunderstand the conversations while they focused on how to answer and try to prepare an answer which was not mentioned much in literature.

Having a socio-cultural competence (Faerch & Kasper, 1986), ambiguity of the message (Watson & Smeltzer, 1984), reluctance for classroom participation (Ferris & Tagg, 1996), and not knowing strategies to apply (Field, 1998; Vandergrift, 1999) are remarked through various studies as the possible hinders while improving listening skills. However, only two students noted them as the problems they face (S10, S26). S10 expressed that *"Listening lesson is the most difficult lesson I have. I think that is either because my strategy to study is wrong or I cannot concentrate at the moment"* while S26 reported *"It is also important to be able to write what you listen to. I need to try to write in one hand while listening on the other"*. This shows that student number 26 does not know listening strategies because what s/he needs to have as skill is a requirement for note-taking course not listening skill. Not being able to ask-answer a question during a conversation (Ferris & Tagg, 1996) and the degree of attractiveness of the listening subject (Carroll, 1977; Dozer, 1997) were listed among problems while acquiring listening skills. Both of these problems were seldom addressed in the interviews. Interestingness of the subject to listen, grammar knowledge of target language (Faerch & Kasper, 1986), and lack of self-confidence are mentioned in the literature (Miller & Endo, 2004; Wolvin & Coakley, 2000). Nonetheless, these issues are not mentioned among the interviewees.

While psychical conditions such as health problems, hunger, headache, and emotional defect were pointed out in literature (Goh & Taib, 2006; Yagang, 1993), only one student mentioned these physical conditions as a part of common problems while improving listening skills. He indicated that he had asthma and his condition was negatively influencing his listening skills. Anxiety and fear are also listed as problems for language learners (In'nami, 2006; Vandergrift, 1999, 2007) and three interviewees mentioned the problem (S6, S22, S28). Student 6 pointed out *"the parts we listened to during the course might cause us to be anxious, so easy parts should be chosen. It is not a skill*

*that can be developed in just during a lesson". Student 22 stated "In listening; the biggest problem is anxiety; I fear I might not understand."*

The lack of background knowledge is another listed challenge (Watson & Smeltzer, 1984), yet only a single student expressed that as a difficulty. Student 28 stated *"It is very difficult for us to watch the videos that require the background knowledge we lack. This strain causes concern."* Lack of contextual knowledge or familiar content is known as a challenge for language learners (Dozer, 1997; Hasan, 2000; Osada, 2004; Yıldırım & Yıldırım, 2016). A number of students (S12, S15, S21, S25) listed the problem. S12 stated that *"I sometimes have to listen a few times while listening to what they say when speakers talk with abbreviations."* S21 pointed *"The biggest problem we have encountered in listening is the use of words and phrases that we do not know in English songs and other contexts. It makes the language much more difficult to understand. I have to watch and listen more to overcome."* S25 said *"Activities in the listening lesson should be at the level of background knowledge of the class. More texts and passages should be listened and priority should be given to ear familiarity."*

Another problem students might come across while learning listening skill is the environmental distractions such as phone rings, other noises (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Dunkel, 1991; Watson & Smeltzer, 1984; Yıldırım & Yıldırım, 2016), yet the two factors were stated only 6 and 5 times, respectively. Student 7 stated *"We cannot understand the conversations in the activities at the desired level because of the inadequate materials used in listening and muffling of the voice"*. Student 9 remarked *"I am much more relaxed in listening at home because when listening in the school, I usually have problems caused by the device."* Student 28 said *"The sound from the radio, TV, computer etc. may not be clear and strays. This causes concern, disrupts our motivation, and we fail because of the reasons I have mentioned above."* S32 stated *"the quality of the materials and the lack of clarity are some problems in listening."*

Degree of motivation (Carroll, 1977; Dunkel, 1991) was expressed as a potential problem by S28. The student stated *"The difficulty we experience in listening class is causing concern and disrupting our motivation. In fact, we usually fail even when we can be successful."* The low level of the listening proficiency of the students mainly due to the lack of wide range of word knowledge would result in the inability to understand the spoken language (Bonk, 2000; Goh, 2000; Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010; Staehr, 2009; Wesche & Paribakht, 1996). Not surprisingly many students expressed concerns regarding the problem. For example, S2 expressed *"At first, in listening I could not understand all of the words, but there was no trouble after I solved the word problem"* clearly indicating the lack of word knowledge. Similarly, S5 had difficulty understanding and expressed saying *"I did not use to understand what I had in listening. I would not understand 3 out of 5 words."*

The speed of the speeches (Dunkel, 1991; Gilakjani, & Ahmadi, 2011; Underwood, 1989; Vandergrift, 2007; Weinstein-shr & Griffiths, 1992) was also remarked as a common problem among students (S1, S8, S19, S23, S28, S29, S31). S1 expressed *"I cannot understand the words because the talk is fast."* S12 similarly had the same concern stated as *"I sometimes have to listen a few times when I listen to even short*

*phrases in conversation. I have difficulty of understanding.*" S29 had clearer explanation of the issue pointing *"Sometimes I have difficulty in understanding what is said. In this case, I expect teachers to explain in every situation. For example, slowing down what we listen to can make it easier to understand what it means."* S8 indicated the very same concern as *"I am having a hard time understanding because the conversation seems very quick."* S19 had the same problem solved with repetition of listening.

A relatively large number of students expressed concerns regarding the lack of publicly available listening materials designated for the learners' level (S3, S10, S13, S15, S17, S18, S24). S3 suggested *"Apart from the course book, different sources should be provided for extracurricular activities"*. S10 expressed concerns regarding the infrastructure of language schools that is providing guidance along with the materials. The student expressed that *"In particular, there is not enough material to listen to and the school management should arrange a computer room, or help the students in this regard."* The concerns of other students were similar with the variation in the choice of words, familiarity with content. Student 15 recorded that *"I am trying very hard to find the closest videos and speeches to the topics we have learned in class and I am having a hard time. For this reason, I have to work in a much wider area. It is like looking for a needle in the haystack, that is, I have listening materials problem that is parallel to the class."* Lack of language laboratories in language departments was one of the barriers mentioned in literature (Vandergrift, 2004; Noom-Ura, 2013).

#### **4.2 The Autonomous Strategies to Overcome the Listening Comprehension Problems**

The second part of each question targeted the delineation of strategies each student prefers for overcoming challenges they identified in the first part of the question. Content analysis and frequencies of personal and autonomous strategies regarding the listening comprehension 32 learners participating in the qualitative study was analyzed in parallel to the reported studies.

The in depth evaluations regarding listening skills revealed that the students found the class listening activities were inadequate. Therefore, most students stated that they need to include extracurricular activities and continue to do the individual work in order to develop the skill. S27 points out the importance of extracurricular hearing activities by stating *"I do not do anything specifically but I know it is inadequate"*.

To improve listening skills, students reported several strategies most of which were can be classified under two groups. To practice listening outside the class (Field 1998; Vandergrift, 1999) and maintaining individual studies, listening radio, watching T.V. and seeing foreign movies (Gary & Gary, 1981) were mostly pointed out by total of 27 students. S2 listed a number of activities: *"I listen to English music for listening and listen to the CDs of some books I bought from abroad. I listen to English broadcast radio."* A similar set of practices were listed by S3: *"Although I am limited in listening, I try to watch foreign movies, listen to videos, and try to translate foreign songs on my phone"*. Another student indicated extensive exploitation of online resources. S4 stated *"for listening, I constantly searched the English dialogs online and downloaded them to my computer. I listen to*

*them all the time. I constantly listen to dialogues and songs in English, and I believe I have developed myself.” S7 remarked “I try to listen to a lot of different sources to improve listening skills such as listening to radio, watching series, listening to various documentaries. I do not think someone could develop the skill just by listening English songs. Because most grammar rules are not followed and there are accent differences in songs”. S9 expressed “I usually used to listen English online when I was in high school. I now use a resourceful website. There is listening and practice together. I also use extra materials of the course book.”*

Choosing authentic materials was mentioned both in literature and interviews (Dozer, 1997; Field 1998; Thanajaro, 2000; Thompson & Rubin, 1996). About 18 students agreed on the benefit of having authentic materials. For instance, S15 stated that *“I am watching short film tutorials (extra British accent). I am watching foreign news channels which deal with contemporary events and current TV series.”* S13 expressed that *“I try to improve this skill via listening to English audio CD’s”*. Similarly, the remark from S16 *“I either listen to foreign music or watch movies in English but I do not think it works because I mostly focus on reading subtitles”* indicated use of authentic materials. S18 indicated *“I generally listen to the recordings of books and then I re-listen before going to sleep so I could imagine the written version of that passage”*. S19, S20, S22, S23, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30 also indicated that they either do one of the individual activities mentioned above or both listen and watch something authentic to improve. Furthermore, involvement of the real life parts, dialogues, videos, radio or TV program sections in the classroom listening was emphasized in the literature (Dozer, 1997; Field, 1998; Morley, 1991) Marks, 2000) and expressed by the interviewed students (S18).

Choosing listening activities with the script (Field, 1998) was reflected by 4 students (S18, S19, S25, S26). They also indicated that following writings along with the audio is easier to follow compare to the sole audio. S26 for example, stated that *“The videos we watch must be subtitled so that I can see what I hear. I think this is important”*. Listening appropriate level and interesting topics (Dozer, 1997; Field, 1998; Vandergrift, 1999) were discussed in literature and uttered to overcome difficulty of listening. S25 clearly pointed that expressing *“Listening activities should be at class level, priority should be given to more listening practices”*.

Developing strategies using listening techniques, and activities were discussed widely in literature (Chen, 2005; Field, 1998; Goh, 1998; Renandya & Farrell, 2010; Vandergrift, 1999; Young, 1997). The statement *“teaching students higher level cognitive and metacognitive strategies (such as inferencing) and self-monitoring strategies will solve students’ listening problems”* (Renandya & Farrell, 2010) eloquently describe the role of strategies in improving listening. Nonetheless, using listening techniques, and activities were not described as extracurricular activities by students. Interestingly S31 emphasized that s/he had developed her/his listening skills in different ways. For example, writing sentences from various books to *Google Translate* and using listening function of the website, student recreate an audio and use the audio to improve the listening skills. It is noteworthy that students do not have enough knowledge to use cognitive strategy (Field, 1998; Vandergrift, 1999) development or listening techniques.

### 4.3 The Problems and Challenges in Conversation Skills

The responses from the students regarding to the inquiry that difficulties and how they handle the difficulties were thoroughly analyzed. A vast majority of students draw attention to problems such as not being able to be exposed to target language, lack of practice (Cele-Murcia et al. 2001; Lazaraton, 2001), less communication with native speakers (Miller & Endo 2004) (17), and discourse competence in speaking lessons (Lazaraton, 2001; Shumin, 2002; Alptekin, 2002). Challenges that are not mentioned at all include cultural differences, home longing, social difficulties (S0) and socio-linguistic competence (S0).

The main difficulties encountered by students during conversation were hesitation and shyness (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Tsou, 2005). (S1, S3, S5, S10), hesitation: S1 stated *"I get excited when I talk and I confuse the words. Sometimes I hesitate"*. S3 similarly stated *"I am very hesitant to talk, so I am having a hard time. I often hesitate even to say things I know right. I have to practice a lot, but I cannot do it alone"*. S5 also stated *"The greatest challenge I faced was being excited and not being able to speak. If I made a wrong sentence, I was afraid that my classmates would make fun of me. I therefore hesitated to speak"*. S10 expressed the very same fact in the statement *"I hesitate to join in a conversation and I feel ashamed. I am afraid to say something wrong and be misunderstood."*

The lack of access to practice with the natives was expressed extensively among the responses (S2, S3, S5, S6, S7, S13, S14, S17). For example, S2 expressed that *"The biggest challenge I had on the conversation was to find some natives to improve"*. S3 expressed same basic problem *"I wish everyone had access to native conversation partners"*. S6 stated *"The biggest problem is that we do not have a constant practical chance of conversation"*. S7 expressed *"The greatest difficulty I face in speaking ability is that I do not have the opportunity to engage to an English conversation"*. S14 pointed the fact that *"there are not many people around to practice with"* implying the importance of the constant chatting with the native speakers.

Inadequacy of the course hours of speaking were also among the problems commonly referred by the students (S6, S7, S14, S19, S20, S25, S27). S6, S14, and S20 for example stated the same basic observation that *"the course hour of the conversation classes does not meet our demand and needs..."* whereas the S7, S19, S25, and S27 demanded *"increasing the hours of the conversation courses"*.

Based on my personal experience and extensive interaction with students, lack of self-confidence was an important barrier while gaining speaking skills and the studies in literature supported this observation (Cele-Murcia et al. 2001; Lazaraton, 2001; Miller & Endo, 2004; Sawir, 2005). Several students mentioned that lack of confidence result in not performing in courses (S3, S10, S21, S25, S28). S3 said *"I am very hesitant to talk, so I am having a hard time. I often hesitate even to say things I know right."* S21 pointed *"the greatest problem I have is the lack of confidence. If I had the confidence, I would be in a better level."* S28 stated the same problem in a rather different statement via *"...because sometimes I see our friends laugh at those who make mistakes in the classroom that reduce my confidence."* In addition to the lack of confidence, hesitation has also been noted as



barrier while improving the speaking skills (Goodwin, 2001; Lazaraton, 2001; Miller & Endo, 2004; Sawir, 2005). S17 for example stated *"I am afraid of making mistakes"* and S10 stated *"I hesitate to talk myself in conversation class and feel ashamed. Because I am afraid to say something wrong and be misunderstood, I know I can only overcome the problem myself.."* both implying the that the problem also persist among students.

The competence of all the aspects of language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation) is noted as an important factor that effect the conversation skills (Florez, 1999; Lazaraton, 2001; Sawir, 2005; Shumin, 2002). S3 for instance, pointed that incompetency in vocabulary results problems in conversation. S8 also magnified the same problem emphasizing the grammar competence and it is direct effect on gaining conversation skills. The student stated that *"sometimes I make mistakes in grammar while talking. Our instructor and lecture hours for conversation might be adequate. However, there is a need to focus more on grammar."*

The topics selected for the conversation and the content of the course need to be interesting and attractive for the students. Problems regarding the attractiveness and being interesting has been identified as another potential problem (Rossiter et al. 2010). The issue was expressed by only a single student. S26 suggested *"...sometimes I remember nothing related to the conversation topic. Perhaps more interesting subjects can be selected...."*

Furthermore, students who know multiple languages and study a new language can make transfer mistakes especially during speech phase. S28 mentioned the problem and stated that *"I have a language conflict with words Kurdish-German-Turkish and English which I started to learn recently. I can make a lot of mistakes in the case of word similarity among languages. I do not want to use a language when I can use other words. I cannot do individual work in this regard"*.

Although inability to use technical and communication skills in speaking (Lazaraton, 2001; Tsou 2005), less attendance (Sawir, 2005; Tsou, 2005), strategic competence (Lazaraton, 2001; Shumin, 2002), and learning style differences (Sawir, 2005) were factors mentioned in literature, none were discussed by interviewees. Strategic competence refers to the ability to know when and how to use, how to make a speech, how to stop talking, and how to deal with communication failures and comprehension problems (Shumin, 2002)

#### **4.4 The Autonomous Strategies to Overcome the Conversation Problems**

The answers of participating students to improve speech were analyzed. When overall frequencies are considered the two main activities suggested. The most frequently suggested activity was constant conversation practices with a frequency of 25/32 whereas the second was increased interaction with the native speakers with a frequency of 18/32. Among those who referred the benefit of constant conversation practice, S3 expressed *"...but there is not enough opportunity for conversation. So, I ask myself questions at home and answer, record my voice and correct pronunciation errors."* S2 stated *"I have found strangers on the internet to improve my speaking skills."* S5 said *"I work in a hotel or a tourist*

*destination during summertime". S4 remarked "When I was in college, I could not speak, I understood what they said, but I could not answer. Then I got into many English groups on Facebook. I started talking in Skype and now I can talk, but my only goal is to speak fluently". S6 also pointed that "I make friends over the internet and talk to the camera to improve my conversational skills." S7 expressed that "I make use of social networks; Skype and Facebook allow me to interact with English-speaking people." S8 stated that "I constantly develop my speaking skills by talking to people, friends, and instructors on social media. Therefore, since I started college, my speaking skill has improved a lot." On the top of the list of individual studies that students make in general to improve speaking skills are face to face interactions with native speakers or speaking virtually on the internet. Luckier students can improve their speaking skills by working in tourist areas or by using opportunities such as "work and travel" and staying abroad for 3 months. S10 benefited talking online with natives and said that "I talk to strangers in the virtual world paying attention to how words are pronounced and how sentences are formed and I try to use what I learned in my own conversations." S16 recorded that "I often speak with foreigners." S31 stated that "I make native friends by writing or talking on various sites." S21 agreed that practice is needed with natives to develop language expressing that "practice, courage and self-confidence are essential for speech." S15 however, used an extraordinary strategy to improve in addition to the native exposure. S/he explained that "I listen to and repeat sample conversations from the search engine and try to practice what I learn. Working in tourism sector has played a very important role in improving the conversation skills".*

Presence of different speakers are emphasized in the literature for the development of speaking skills (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Rossiter et al. 2010; Sawir, 2005). Some students mentioned the possibility of listening to various speakers. S17 for example, indicated that *"there should be more interaction with natives."* S19 similarly stated *"Speaking with various natives improves speech skills and pronunciation."*

Foreign speaking skills are best learned in the country where the language is spoken (Sawir, 2005). S16 stated that *"I cannot practice enough. So, I forget the words and phrases I learn since I do not use them. Therefore, educational institutions should send the students abroad even for a short period of time like for summer season or at least a month"*. S17 agreed on the issue stating *"It is also necessary to study abroad"*.

Among the different working methods, S13 studied by memorizing words, while S14 focused on abbreviations and pronunciations. S15 studied by listening to sample conversations in web based search engine. S30 was trying to speak English in front of the mirror.

To be able to develop communication competence, more practicing in writing was suggested (Ferris ve Tagg, 1996) and one student (S18) pointed that writing could help develop communication skills. S18 said *"I keep a diary for writing skills. When I realized that I did not make mistakes in time, I want to write short stories. In fact, writing is one of the obvious ways of learning a language, because the brain is then outwardly gaining skills. This also influences my speaking positively"*.

Teaching pronunciation, intonation, and stress of language (Harmer, 2001; Morley, 1991) were seen important to improve (S3, S4, S10, 14, S17, S19, S23). For instance, S3 stated *"I am recording my voice and listen later. If I have pronunciation errors, I redo the process. I pay attention to the pronunciation of those who speak in movies"*.

Being exposed to different speakers is noted to be effective in the development of conversation skills (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). A total of 14 students have emphasized this issue. S4 conveyed that *"When I was in college, I could not speak, I understood what they said, but I could not answer. Then I got into many English conversation groups. I started talking in Skype and now I can talk, but my only goal is to speak fluently."* S8 also stated that *"I work hard for conversation skills. I constantly develop this by talking to friends, our instructors, and people on social media"*. S19 agreed on how important it is to speak and expose to different native speakers to improve the skill by saying *"speaking with different native speakers improves speech skills and improves pronunciation as well"*.

Although the usage of mother tongue when needed is seen as a motivational motif for students to engage the ongoing conversations (Miller & Endo, 2004), students did not mention this strategy at all. Differences in learning styles, motivation, and inter-class interaction (Sawir, 2005), encouraging naturalness, creativeness and uniqueness (Mariani 1994), decreasing the cognitive load, cultural and language load (Miller ve Endo, 2004) were some ways to improve speech skill. Some other techniques suggested to improve communication skills in literature are using species-specific words (Ferris ve Tagg, 1996; Lazaraton, 2001), reading more by different material (Ferris ve Tagg, 1996), applying and evaluating teaching techniques and approaches (Miller ve Endo, 2004; Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtim, Thomson, 2010). However, they were not noticed by interviewees.

## 5. Recommendations

From a student perspective, the lack of motivation in the form of hesitation, lack of confidence, and shyness is one of the most important obstacles while gaining listening and conversation skills. In this respect, it is necessary that the lecturers who are teaching the language should help the students to surmount of hesitation, lack of confidence and the shyness.

In addition to enhancing motivation, teaching staff should be to be aware of effective listening and conversation techniques and strategies, learning to learn language, cognitive awareness strategy, and apply them in the classroom. The present study revealed that students do have some problems regarding the strategies to effectively choose the extracurricular activities. Therefore, a part of formal training in listening and conversation courses should be transferring the strategies to the learners. Some suggestion steps for a standard strategy training activity are raising students' awareness, helping them brainstorm the strategies, having them practice the strategies, guiding them in selecting the strategies that address their particular needs, and evaluating their progress and strategy use (Renandya & Farrell, 2010).

In language education, students should be informed systematically during the language learning process by acknowledging that foreign language learning is a difficult and time consuming process. Outside of the classroom, they should try to develop the two skills. They must improve their listening skills through various listening passages/texts, diversify resources that include online material, and actively engaged to the conversation.

Proposals have also been made for the management and administration of institutions. Administrations should provide environments to improve students' language skills. For this purpose, chat rooms should be established. Language laboratories equipped with listening materials should be formed and be made available to learners.

## 6. Conclusion

In the current study, qualitative data from 32 students aiming to study at various departments and were pursuing to School of Foreign Languages in Kafkas University/Turkey at the time were examined in the light of the literature. Our results revealed that the students have a number of problems in listening due to the length of the materials used or the length or complexity of the cues. At the time of the interview, a lack of language laboratory for listening skills was also mentioned. In addition, the inadequacy of class hours of listening was emphasized. This shortcoming, which students have expressed, has increased the listening hours set by the school management after the results of this study. A similar language lab was created and opened for student use in the academic year 2014-2015. The results also unveiled that the students developed strategies and employ activities that are also widely discussed in the literature such as extracurricular listening activities, watching movies in their native English form, listening music, and exploring online resources.

A number of difficulties encountered by students in conversation skills (excitement, anxiety, fear-anxiety, lack of self-esteem, pace of speech, pronunciation problems, and the inadequacy of the speaking course hour) were also expressed. It has been observed that students conduct various activities and developed different strategies to overcome the difficulties they face in speaking. They applied the recommended strategies such as talking face to face with native speakers or talking on the internet virtually, working in tourist areas, or using work and travel opportunities. Among other solutions and strategies the students developed to handle the problems were increasing emphasis on grammar, more word acquisition, the increase in the number of lecture hours, formation of conversation clubs, going abroad even for a short period of time (e.g. work and travel), and conversation with the native speakers.

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